

The Sahel Conflict and Contagion in the Coastal Countries of Africa

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I. Introduction

The Sahel region, a vast semi-arid belt that stretches across Africa just south of the Sahara Desert, has been marred by a complex and multifaceted conflict for decades. This conflict is characterized by a blend of political, ethnic, economic, and environmental factors that have fuelled tensions and violence among various groups. Key actors include armed rebel groups, government forces, and extremist organizations. They vie for control over territory, resources, and power, often exacerbating existing ethnic and religious divisions. Factors such as limited access to essential services, droughts, and food insecurity further amplify the region's challenges. The Sahel Conflict, in essence, is a troubling tale of how intertwined issues can escalate into a protracted crisis with profound regional implications.

Picture 1.0 Images reflecting impact of conflict in Niger & Mali leaving children in limbo.



Source: International Crisis Group, 2023

The impact of conflicts isn't confined by borders. The Sahel Conflict serves as a stark example of this phenomenon, as its repercussions have been observed rippling beyond its immediate boundaries. This study aims to unravel the contagion effect, exploring how conflict-driven instability can spill over and affect countries along the African coast. Coastal countries, despite

being geographically distant from the Sahel, are not immune to the turmoil. The movement of refugees, the spread of extremist ideologies, and economic disruptions have the potential to create a chain reaction of instability, transforming local issues into regional challenges. Understanding this contagion effect is crucial for devising effective strategies to contain conflict-driven instability and ensure the security and prosperity of coastal African nations.

This article endeavours to shed light on the highly significant issue of how conflicts like the Sahel Conflict can extend their reach beyond borders. This article aspires to contribute to informed discussions and strategies that foster peace and security across the African continent.

II. The Sahel Conflict: Causes and Dynamics

The causes and dynamics of the Sahel conflict are multifaceted, stemming from historical, political, economic, and social factors. The region's susceptibility to instability is exemplified by classical cases such as the Tuareg rebellion, the rise of extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP, and the challenges posed by weak governance and external interventions.

The Tuareg rebellion stands as a classical case illustrating the historical roots of the Sahel conflict. The Tuareg people, represented by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), sought autonomy and recognition for their cultural identity¹. This rebellion, which had previously emerged in 1963, 1990, and 2006, resurfaced in 2012 due to a confluence of factors, including the influx of extremists into northern Mali. The MNLA's alliance with Islamist groups like AQIM and MUJAO created a complex dynamic, reflecting the intersection of ethnic aspirations and extremist ideologies. This illustrates how historical grievances and cultural identities become entangled with broader regional dynamics, fuelling conflict.

¹Bos, M., & Melissen, J. (2019). Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel. *International Affairs*, 95(6), 1331-1348.

²Asfura-Heim, P., & McQuaid, J. (2015). Diagnosing the Boko Haram conflict: Grievances, motivations, and institutional resilience in northeast Nigeria. *CNA*.

³Carbone, G., & Casola, C. (2022). Sahel, 10 years of instability: local, regional, and international dynamics. *Sahel, 10 years of instability*, 1-139.

⁴Mitchell, S. M., & Pizzi, E. (2023). Natural disasters, forced migration, and conflict: The importance of government policy responses. *International Studies Review*, 23(3), 580-604.

⁵Kohnert, D. (2022). The impact of Islamist terrorism on Africa's informal economy: Kenya, compared with Ghana and Senegal. Compared with Ghana and Senegal (June 24, 2022).

The rise of Boko Haram and its transformation into ISWAP exemplify the evolving dynamics of conflicts in the Sahel. ²Boko Haram's origins in 2002 were rooted in local grievances and societal inequalities. Its shift towards a more aggressive strategy in 2011, symbolized by suicide attacks, demonstrated how extremism adapt and escalate. The group's alignment with the Islamic State in 2015 marked a significant transformation, revealing the contagion of extremist ideologies across borders. This shift also illustrated how a combination of internal discontent and transnational affiliations drive conflict dynamics.

Weak governance, corruption, and legitimacy deficits form another pivotal aspect of the conflict's dynamics. The concentration of power in urban areas while leaving rural regions underdeveloped created fertile ground for extremist groups to exploit grievances. Military coups, exemplified by Mali's history of multiple coups between 1960 and 2022, exacerbated political instability³. The subsequent collapse of state institutions allowed the MNLA to capture and declare the independent state of Azawad in northern Mali, showcasing how political upheaval can enable the emergence of new actors and entities in a conflict.

Table 1.0 Shows the effects of Conflicts in the African region that resulted in the forced displacement of citizens⁴.

Countries Most Contributing to Forced Displacement in Africa				
Country	IDPs	Refugees and Asylum Seekers	Total	Percentage of Country's Population Displaced
Sudan	6,011,010	1,292,949	7,303,959	16
DRC	6,101,300	1,039,793	7,141,093	7
Somalia	4,395,000	739,298	5,134,298	29
South Sudan	2,229,657	2,321,994	4,551,651	42
Nigeria	3,578,996	403,887	3,982,883	2
Ethiopia	3,143,255	279,412	3,422,667	3
Burkina Faso	2,062,534	73,941	2,136,475	9
CAR	485,825	753,324	1,239,149	22
Cameroon	1,066,254	141,108	1,207,362	4
Mozambique	834,304	8,685	842,989	3
Mali	375,539	220,695	596,234	3
Eritrea	n/a	587,301	587,301	16
Chad	381,289	17,216	398,505	2
Niger	358,185	23,743	381,928	1
Burundi	8,177	333,794	341,971	3
Total Displaced in Africa:			40,398,156	

Source: Africa Centre for Strategic studies, 2023

III. Mechanisms of Conflict Spread from the Sahel to Coastal Africa

1. **Ideological Contagion:** Extremist ideologies can transcend borders, inspiring and recruiting individuals in neighbouring countries. For instance, the spread of Boko Haram's ideology from Nigeria to countries in the Lake Chad Basin, such as Chad and Niger, led to the formation of factions like ISWAP, which replicated Boko Haram's tactics and expanded its violence across borders. This ideological contagion has contributed to the regionalization of conflict.
2. **Refugee Movements:** Displaced populations often carry conflict with them as they seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The Sahel conflict's refugee flows have extended instability into coastal African countries. For instance, the movement of refugees from Mali and Burkina Faso into coastal states like Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana has created challenges for these countries, potentially introducing conflict-related tensions and security risks.
3. **Militant Spillover:** Militant groups often exploit porous borders to evade security forces. The Sahel's proximity to coastal African countries facilitates the infiltration of extremist groups. The activities of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have spilled over into countries like Burkina Faso and Mali. This spillover not only increases conflict zones but also exacerbates security challenges for coastal nations.
4. **Transnational Networks:** Extremist organizations establish transnational networks that enable them to operate across borders. These networks facilitate the movement of fighters, weapons, and resources. For instance, the collaboration between various extremist groups in the Sahel, such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and ISGS, has allowed them to expand their influence from the Sahel into coastal African countries, posing a broader security threat.
5. **Refugee Infiltration:** While refugees seek safety, extremist elements may infiltrate their ranks, exploiting the displacement for their own ends. This phenomenon has been observed in the Lake Chad Basin, where Boko Haram elements have infiltrated refugee populations, potentially radicalizing, and recruiting vulnerable individuals in neighbouring countries.

IV. Recent Developments in the Region

In February 2022, France and its European allies, part of Task Force Takuba, announced their plan to withdraw troops from Mali, ending a nearly decade-long intervention. This withdrawal empowered extremist groups, leading to a surge in violence in the region. The Liptako-Gourma area and coastal West Africa saw a significant rise in attacks during the first half of 2022, resulting in over 2,000 civilian deaths, a 50% increase from the previous year⁵. March 2022 was especially deadly due to increased activity by ISGS along the Niger-Mali border and the Moura massacre in central Mali. In response, Malian soldiers and Russian mercenaries launched a five-day attack on militants, causing civilian casualties and prompting a UN investigation. The situation escalated as Mali terminated its Defense Cooperation Treaty with France and withdrew from the G5 Sahel (comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), weakening counterterrorism efforts. This was followed by attacks on civilians by extremist groups, and in June 2023, Mali demanded the departure of the UN peacekeeping force (MINUSMA), raising concerns about a power vacuum and setbacks in the transition to civilian rule⁷.

Burkina Faso experienced a military coup in January 2022, resulting in political turmoil and a series of deadly attacks by extremist groups, including ISGS. A subsequent coup in September led to the dissolution of the government and border closures. Speculation arose about connections between the coup leader and the US military.

The US and UK recalled embassy officials from Nigeria in October 2022 due to an increased risk of terrorism, after several incidents of gun violence in the country. In January 2023, UN experts called for an investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by government forces and the Wagner Group in Mali. Russia's Wagner Group faced setbacks but continued operations in Africa⁶. Allegations of civilian massacres emerged in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2023, involving security forces and armed groups. The UN's withdrawal from Mali raised concerns of heightened violence against civilians, mirroring patterns seen in Burkina Faso.

⁶Pokalova, E. (2023). The Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's Quasi-State Agent of Influence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-23.

Lazard, O., & Youngs, R. (2021). The EU and climate security: toward ecological diplomacy. *Carnegie Europe*, 12.

⁷Adela, G. (2023). A Force for the Right Purpose? Rethinking Western COIN Interventions in Africa's Sahel. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 22(3).

A coup in Niger in July 2023 marked the ninth attempted overthrow in the region in three years, impacting counterterrorism efforts. The coup leaders resisted pressure to relinquish power, garnering support from nearby military regimes. This upheaval jeopardized Niger's role as a counterterrorism partner. The US and France maintained military presence, but instability was exploited by Russia's Wagner Group.

IV. Conclusions

In the realm of conflict resolution, it is crucial for states to take a more proactive role in facilitating dialogue and mediation, both among local communities and between them and state entities. This need is particularly pronounced in regions like Liptako-Gourma, which has been the focal point of recent international efforts, as well as in other critical areas such as central Mali and eastern Burkina Faso. These endeavours should form the bedrock for the reintegration of the state into rural zones. Furthermore, external partners have a role in encouraging Sahelian governments to initiate dialogues aimed at peacefully managing the competition, exacerbated by climate change, for access to natural resources. This is particularly pertinent in instances of tension between farmers and herders. These external actors can play a dual role by both advocating for such initiatives by authorities and contributing their expertise.

Secondly, there exists an opportunity for stakeholders to provide support to state institutions in delivering fundamental services, most notably healthcare and education, even in regions where security forces are not yet present. The predominant security-oriented approach taken by external actors implicitly encourages Sahelian states to follow suit. Presently, these states allocate up to 40 percent of their budgets to security concerns⁸. While acknowledging the limitations of state resources, a portion of this allocation could potentially be redirected towards confidence-building measures, encompassing enhancements in healthcare, education, and more equitable mechanisms for managing rural resources. Such measures would constitute a significant stride in persuading local communities to welcome state involvement.

Thirdly, the role of stakeholders should encompass motivating Sahelian states to enhance their management of public finances. The populace across these nations consistently calls for such reforms. While this nudge towards reform is by no means straightforward, one avenue could be to lead aid packages more robustly to fiscal transparency and accountability. An illustrative example is the case of Mali, where donors could urge the transitional authorities to devise an action plan committing to transparent utilization of state resources prior to reinstating aid suspended following the coup. ⁹In Niger, partners should exert pressure on authorities to

prosecute those implicated in embezzlement, as revealed by the August 2020 audit, and consider suspending security cooperation until legal proceedings are initiated. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, donors could tie their assistance to government commitments to prosecute security personnel responsible for misconduct against civilians. This approach doesn't entail the threat of terminating military support; rather, it involves linking specific programs, and thus resources valued by Sahel leaders, to reform efforts. Suspending these programs is unlikely to significantly alter the balance of power between state forces and militant groups.

⁸Gazzotti, L. (2021). *Immigration nation: Aid, control, and border politics in Morocco*. Cambridge University Press.

Ketzmerick, M. (2023). The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon: local conflict, global competition, and transnational rebel governance. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34(1), 247-278.

⁹Bagayoko, N. (2022). Explaining the failure of internationally supported defence and security reforms in Sahelian states. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 22(3), 243-269.